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SUBJECT: SYRIAN MP SAYS INTELL CHIEF WANTS TO BE FRIENDS

REF: DAM 150

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: A Syrian MP and businessman told us January 24 that, despite a U.S. decision to freeze the assets of Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) chief Asif Shawqat, the intelligence head still considered himself a friend of the United States and wanted to resume bilateral intelligence sharing. Later in the conversation (as if it had just occurred to him), the MP mentioned the recent arrest and detention here of several al-Qaida members. The MP said the USG should arrange for a meeting between high-level U.S. officials and Shawqat either in Damascus or in the United States to discuss the resumption of intelligence cooperation, as well the USG's package of demands on Syria. Although the MP said that the Syrian public and SARG officials felt relaxed and in a position of strength, he also noted that Syrian President Asad might be too worried about internal threats to travel outside Syria. There was nothing subtle about the message of the Parliamentarian who obviously felt authorized to reach out to us on Shawqat's behalf, but it remains in question whether the SMI chief wants a deal for himself or the SARG as a whole. End Summary.

12. (C) Syrian MP and businessman Hashem Akkad, known to have close ties to SMI chief Asif Shawqat (reftel), told Econchief and Poloff January 24 that despite a U.S. decision to freeze Shawqat's assets, the intelligence head still considered himself a friend of the United States and wanted to resume bilateral intelligence sharing. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad had made the original decision in 2005 to sever the intelligence link against Shawqat's wishes, but Shawqat could persuade Asad to reverse that position, said Akkad, who acknowledged that he is a close Shawqat confidant. The SMI chief was interested in resuming intelligence cooperation because it would make his job easier, the MP said.

13. (C) Later in the conversation (as if it had just occurred to him), Akkad noted recent arrests by Syrian authorities of several members of al-Qaida who were being detained here. The al-Qaida members, who had based their operations in Syria, had been planning attacks on SARG authorities and foreign diplomats and facilities, Akkad said. None of the detainees were sought by U.S. authorities, said Akkad, who also noted that several were from African countries,

including Somalia. The arrests were not public knowledge, Akkad confided.

14. (C) To discuss the resumption of intelligence sharing and "other matters," the USG should arrange for a meeting between high-level U.S. officials and Shawqat either in Damascus or

in the United States, Akkad said. When asked about specific topics for such a meeting, Akkad asserted that Syria could not accept the U.S. "package of demands" as it stood. Syria could make concessions on Iraq but could not eject Palestinian rejectionist groups ("where would they go?") or support the disarmament of Hizballah without a significant political tradeoff, he said. "We won't give up our cards for nothing," Akkad said. The Syrian regime and the Syrian public want a peace deal with Israel, asserted Akkad, noting that President Bashar al-Asad is more genuine in this regard than his father. On WMD, Syria would also resist concessions without Israeli commitments on its nuclear arms, Akkad said. No country in the region supported the annihilation of Israel, claimed Akkad, who brushed aside a question about Syria-Iran ties by saying Damascus would not need that alliance if it had a better relationship with Israel and the U.S.

15. (C) Asked about the political climate, Akkad said that the Syrian public and the SARG felt relaxed and in a position of strength. Domestically, not many Syrians watched President Asad's January 21 televised speech because they no longer felt nervous about Syria's stand-off with the West, Akkad claimed. Asked whether President Asad would be traveling soon, Akkad thought a while and said he was not aware of any presidential travel plans. Then he commented, "The President might be too worried to travel outside of the country for fear of internal threats like those in Mauritania." When asked to elaborate, Akkad said, "There is no threat from people on the left because they offer the country nothing. The threat is from people on the right (regime insiders) who have something to bring to the table."

16. (C) Comment: There was nothing subtle about Akkad's message, which is the latest in a series of overtures from intermediaries claiming to represent the interest of senior SARG officials in improving ties with the U.S. He noted that that he had met in the past few days with Shawqat, and it was clear Akkad felt authorized to reach out to the U.S. on Shawqat's behalf. Akkad bluntly expressed dislike for President Asad, whom he dubbed as greedy and corrupt, in contrast to Shawqat whom he called "one of the most honest, principled men I have known." Akkad even offered to serve as an intermediary in the event that the USG was looking for a leader to help Syria achieve a "soft landing" in the event of Asad's departure. Akkad's statements indicate that, despite the "relaxed" political climate, at least some members within the regime are uneasy about their political futures. It remains in question whether Shawqat would like to obtain a deal for himself or if he is seeking indirectly to save the entire regime.
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